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AN

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ON THE
USEFULNESS AND NECESSITY

OF

THEOLOGICAL LEARNING,

TO THOSE WHO ARE DESIGNED FOR

HOLY ORDERS,

BY

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The following publication, which is the substance of a Discourse lately held before the
 University of Cambridge, was principally occasioned by the following circumstance. The
 author had been frequently asked, during his residence in Germany, 'What is the plan of
 study adopted in your Universities for those, who are designed to take Orders, to what
 branches of Divinity do they particularly attend, and how many years must a student have
 heard the different courses of theological lectures before he is admitted to an office in the
 church?' He was unable at that time to give a satisfactory answer, because theological learn-
 ing forms no necessary part of our academical education; but he hopes that due attention
 will in future be given to a study that is at present more neglected than it deserves.

THE necessity of learning in matters of religion is allowed in every nation, and by every sect, where enthusiasm prevails not over reason, and in general those only are admitted to the sacred office, who have enjoyed the benefits of a liberal education. But beside the general erudition, which is acquired in our schools and universities, there is a knowledge of a peculiar kind indispensably requisite to every man, whose station requires him to study and expound the word of God. One of the most eminent critics of this century has asserted that of all Greek books, that ever were written, the Greek Testament is the most difficult to be understood; yet there is hardly a Greek author of any importance, on which we bestow not more attention than on this sacred volume. Accustomed from our childhood to the English translation, and in this manner familiarized with its peculiar style, we imperceptibly read the Greek Testament through the medium of a version, which, though highly valuable in its kind, is surely insufficient for those, whose profession obliges them in conscience to direct their principal regard to the sacred writings. But though the greatest number of students in the two Universities is designed for orders, the study of Divinity is regarded

as a secondary consideration ; it has till lately been thought sufficient to apply for a few months after the bachelor's degree without direction and without assistance, nor has it been deemed an impropriety in our mode of education, that those should be appointed to instruct others, who have never been instructed themselves. The study of Divinity deserves to be scientifically treated as much as any branch of human knowledge ; the requisites for a clergyman, who would execute with propriety the duties of his station, are more numerous and more difficult to be acquired, than is usually imagined ; and if we neglect to lay a proper foundation during those years, in which it is, or ought to be our business to acquire those qualifications in particular, which respect our future calling, a want of ability or inclination in a later period of life must expose us to inconveniences, which we have neither courage to overcome, nor even sagacity to perceive. And it is probably owing to this circumstance, that the spirit of criticism, for which this country was distinguished beyond all Europe at the end of the last and the beginning of the present century, has evaporated into empty speculation on the unfruitful points of dogmatic theology.

To avoid however the appearance of vain declamation, and the suspicion of advancing what is unsupported by fact, let us
examine

examine the subject more closely, and consider the advantages, which result from a due regard to theological learning. The necessity of this study taken in the proper sense of the word arises from the two following considerations. 1. It is the only mean of discovering the sense of scripture. 2. It is the surest method of preventing a spirit of persecution, and of promoting brotherly love and charity.

THAT theological learning is indispensably requisite for the understanding of the New Testament, to which alone we will confine our present inquiry, will be most easily shewn by pointing out the peculiar difficulties which attend its interpretation. They either arise from the nature of the subject, or are such as interpreters have unnecessarily created for themselves. As easy and simple as the Greek Testament appears in regard to grammatical construction, though even this is more apparent than real, especially in the epistles of St. Paul, so obscure and difficult are its peculiar phrases and turns of expression, which a knowledge of Greek alone is not sufficient to explain. Instruments in the hands of Providence for the propagation of a new religion the sacred writers were permitted to retain the peculiarities, which unavoidably arose from their birth and education. The contest relative to the purity of the language in the Gospels and Epistles has been long decided, and pious

ignorance alone will compare the idioms of the Greek Testament with the perspicuity and elegance of Attic diction. Even those, who devote their lives to the pursuit of learning, can seldom divest themselves in writing a foreign language of the turns of expression peculiar to their own: and as the first propagators of the Christian religion were purposely selected from a humble station, it is reasonable to expect in their writings the traces rather of an Oriental than of a Grecian dialect. The Apostle of the Gentiles, though born in Tarsus, was still educated in Jerusalem; and a man who had learnt the law at the feet of Gamaliel must be supposed to have had infinitely more Jewish than Grecian literature. The quotation of a verse from Callimachus or Menander, from which so many arguments have been drawn in favour of St. Paul's intimate acquaintance with Grecian poets and even Grecian philosophers, no more affords a presumption in favour of that hypothesis, than the insertion of a Latin motto in a modern treatise would entitle the author to the name of a classical scholar. It by no means derogates from the wisdom of Providence, or from the honour of the Apostles, that they were unacquainted with subjects unnecessary for the high station to which they were appointed; but as it is our duty to take every measure, that can lead to a discovery of the true sense of their writings, we must be cautious on our part not to ascribe to them

them endowments, which would lead to a false interpretation of scripture. Instead of puzzling ourselves with idle speculations in regard to the hidden counsels of the Deity, it is our business to attend to matter of fact; and as this has been established beyond the possibility of a denial, it remains only for those, who undertake to expound the sacred writings, to obtain such qualifications, as are necessary to comprehend a language of so mixed a nature. A knowledge therefore of the Oriental dialects, especially the Syriac, the native language of the sacred writers, in which they thought, and from which they literally translated into Greek, is requisite for those, who would fully comprehend their meaning. The speeches, that were made by our Saviour himself, were delivered in Syriac, and, though they are clothed at present in a Grecian dress, the marks of their Oriental origin are distinctly visible. The subjects also themselves had no immaterial influence on the language, in which they are treated; for notions and doctrines, that were peculiar to the Jewish nation, had no forms, which corresponded in the language of Athens. The style of the Septuagint, the only Greek book, that was an object of study to the sacred writers, was the model, which they imitated in the Greek Testament. The same modes of expression, the same peculiarities of diction, the same singular use and meaning of words are observable in both; and of course an intimate acquaint-

acquaintance with the former is necessary for a right understanding of the latter. But the Greek version in numberless examples is unintelligible without a knowledge of the Hebrew, from which, if we except a few books, it is so servilely translated, that a comparison only with the original can illustrate its meaning: and this comparison, if diligently applied, would contribute in the most eminent manner to an explanation of its peculiar expressions, and, what is the main object of our inquiry, to a right interpretation of the Greek Testament itself.

BUT beside the difficulties, which attend the language of this sacred volume, there are others of no less importance, that respect the subjects which are there discussed. To a knowledge of the Jewish manners, laws and history, as delivered in the Old Testament, must be added a perfect acquaintance with the Rabbinical doctrines, that prevailed in Jerusalem at the time when our Saviour appeared in the world to introduce a new and divine religion. These doctrines are very frequently combated by Christ in his conversations with the Pharisees and Sadducees, which are related by the Evangelists in so concise a manner, as to imply in their readers a knowledge of those sentiments, that were entertained by his opponents. Arguments, though more than human, are insufficient to satisfy
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the curiosity of a rational and speculative mind, without a knowledge of the evidence, that may be produced on both sides of the question, and the triumph of truth over superstition is surely more complete, when the powers of the conquered party have been displayed in all their force. But the speeches of our Saviour, in which the false notions of the masters of the synagogue are especially refuted, are not the only parts of the New Testament, where Rabbinic philosophy is the subject of discourse: the epistles of St. Paul are replete with Jewish literature, and the divine Apostle has quotations and references, that are no where to be found in the simple and sublime compositions of St. John. Nor is the learning, which he has displayed, the only source of difficulty, that we discover in his writings: incessant allusions to local circumstances and events, of which we have no means at present of obtaining information, have afforded more perplexity, than all the commentators have been able to remove. The letters, that were written by Cicero and Pliny, may be explained by the help of the Roman historians; but, if we except the Acts of the Apostles, in which no circumstantial detail is given of the situation of the first Christian communities, not a single record, nor even historical fragment is now extant, that can give us an adequate idea of the state of those early societies.

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HAVING examined the principal difficulties, that attend the New Testament itself, we have next to consider those, which interpreters have created for themselves. It is universally acknowledged that, as an historian ought to be of no party, an interpreter of scripture should be of no sect. His only business is to inquire, what the Apostles and Evangelists themselves intended to express: he must transplant himself if possible into their situation, and in the investigation of each controverted point must examine, whether the sacred writers, circumstanced as they were, could entertain or deliver this or that particular doctrine. This is a piece of justice, that we refuse not to profane authors, and no reason can be assigned, why we should refuse it to those, who have a still higher title to our regard. But, principles of analysis being wholly laid aside, the synthetic method has been preferred from the earliest to the present age: instead of impartially examining the sacred writings, with a view of discovering the truth, in whatever shape it may appear, we enter on the inquiry with a system already adopted, and have erected the edifice, even before the ground has been explored, on which it must be reared. It is from this cause, that the Greek and Latin Churches have discovered in the New Testament their different tenets, and that the most opposite parties, which have arisen in the Christian world, have made the same divine oracles the basis of their respective creeds.

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It is from this source that the church of Rome derives her seven sacraments, the Divine of the Church of England his thirty nine articles, the Lutheran his Symbolic books, and the Calvinist his Confession of faith. Nor has the pernicious practice of weaving a system already adopted into the interpretation of Scripture been confined to modern times, for the Alexandrine fathers united the maxims of the later Platonists with the morality of the Gospel, and the monks of the middle ages supported their theological metaphysics on the writings of Aristotle. Shall we conclude then that the Oracles of the Supreme Being like those of the Heathen Deities are ambiguous and indecisive? Is no fixed point to be discovered from which the truth may be discerned with clearness and certainty? Do those important writings, which serve as a basis for our faith and manners, depend on the arbitrary explanation of interpreters tied down to no rules whatsoever? Rules undoubtedly there are, but they are such as we unwilling, or unable to adopt. In the first place, we must commence the study of the New Testament with a mind free and unprejudiced by party, we must lay aside all system, and forget, if possible, for a time, even the church, of which we are members: we must not endeavour to find detached passages, in order to prove our catechism or our articles, but must await the result of an impartial inquiry, and then institute a comparison between the

creed, which we had learnt, and the conclusions, which we have drawn from our own reflexion. But this inquiry must not be made in a translation; the words of the original must be critically and grammatically weighed, and we must attempt to discover not that meaning, which a heated imagination may ascribe to them, which is as various as there are various sects in the Christian world, but having laid a proper foundation in those languages, without which the Greek Testament cannot be completely understood, and having obtained the necessary knowledge of the sentiments and modes of thinking, which prevailed in Judæa, when our Saviour arose to reform the morals of mankind, we must diligently trace the footsteps of the sacred writers, must place ourselves in their situation, and then candidly ask what they could mean to express. That these conditions have been seldom fulfilled by the interpreters of Scripture ecclesiastical history affords melancholy evidence. The Greek fathers were for the most part ignorant of Hebrew, and the Latin fathers, if we except Jerom, were in general ignorant of Greek. The revival of learning in the fifteenth century produced a general ardour for the study of languages, but that grammatical interpretation, which was strongly recommended by the great reformer of modern ages was too soon rejected for a mode of interpretation which Christian Divines had learnt from the Jews, and the plain and simple meaning

meaning of the Old and New Testament was again converted into allegory, mystery, and types.

SECONDLY, the advantages of theological learning are most conspicuous, when we regard it as a mean of promoting that love and charity, which is the great object of our religion, and which its divine founder recommended as a criterion that distinguished it from every other, By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples. It is an undoubted fact that the further we advance in literary inquiries, the more clearly we discern the narrow limits, to which we are confined; we discover that the petty space, which we ourselves occupy, is less ample than we had imagined, and as pride and arrogance are the characteristic marks of those, whose learning though profound, is limited to a single, or extended at the utmost to a few objects, we almost invariably find that humility and moderation are the distinguishing virtues of those, whose views are enlarged, and whose notions are enlightened. Men of this description have not only the power of perceiving, what indeed no one can deny, that every object may be examined from different points of view, and that the appearance, which it presents, must proportionally vary, but, what is the happy lot of men of this character alone, they possess the ability of placing themselves in these respective situations and of
examining

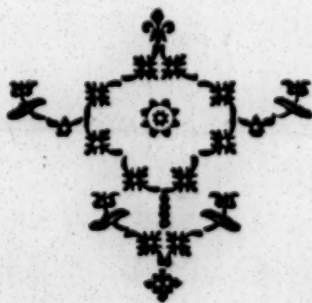
examining one side as candidly as the other. Nor does the appearance depend merely on the position of the spectator; for as in optics the same individual object, when differently placed, may assume as many different hues, as there are colours in the great body of light, so in moral philosophy the same subject in different relations will excite different ideas, and produce a diversity of opinion. It is true that every man, learned or unlearned, believes that the point of view, which he himself has chosen, or rather on which he has been accidentally placed, is the only spot, from which the real shape of the object to be examined can be distinctly perceived, and that the colour represented to his own eye is alone consistent with the truth. This partial mode of thinking is common to all men, but what distinguishes the narrow and the bigoted from the enlarged and generous mind is this material circumstance, that the former condemns as ignorant or impious all those, who have the misfortune to be of different sentiments, while the latter abides indeed by his private opinion, but leaves his brethren in quiet possession of their own.

LASTLY, The objections which have been made to theological learning as useless to a preacher of the Gospel are founded either on a want of judgement, or a false interpretation of scripture. The assertion of St. Paul, that knowledge puffeth up,

up, has been often quoted as a proof that ignorance is better than learning: but this is a perversion of his meaning, for the Apostle himself was not only instructed in all the knowledge which a Jewish education could afford, but he recommends to his readers to prove all things and hold fast that which is good. Zeal without learning produces only wild enthusiasm, but if it be tempered by a general and liberal erudition, it will be attended with meekness and charity, the greatest ornaments of the Christian name.

In the Press and in a few months will be published in two volumes large Octavo,

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